

Discussion Report

‘The New Great Game: Afghanistan’s Taliban Takeover and its Implications for Europe and the Region’

21 June 2023

EIAS, Brussels

On 21 June 2023, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) jointly hosted a discussion on the current and future role of the EU and its Member States in Afghanistan and how they, along with other international actors, could work together to improve the livelihood of the Afghan people in a sustainable manner. The panel included three distinguished experts: **Dr Ellinor Zeino**, member of the German Bundestag Study Commission on Afghanistan and Director of the KAS Regional Programme for Southwest Asia, **Mr Sulaiman Bin Shah**, founder and CEO of Catalysts Afghanistan and former Deputy Minister for Industry and Commerce of Afghanistan, and **Deren Derya**, Head of Division for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the European External Action Service. The panel was moderated by **Lin Goethals**, Director of EIAS.

The panellists kickstarted the discussion with some brief opening remarks. Dr Zeino informed the audience of the need to accept the realities in front of us, the first being that we lost the war. The Taliban government is in power and is likely to be there for the foreseeable future. The second being the age demographic in Afghanistan and the significance of the majority of the population being under the age of 18. She stressed how that proportion of society does not have a clear perspective, containing the risk to spark revolt and radicalisation. Hence, what is the ideal that the younger generation of Afghanistan pursues and will lead them into the future?

Sulaiman Bin Shah welcomed the EU’s continued support for Afghanistan and its non-violent military approach. He also stressed the reality of the Taliban and how the US-Taliban Joint declaration contributed to many of the issues faced today. He stressed the need for the EU and the US to have a united vision when it comes down to Afghanistan. However, he also fears that the historical context may complicate this and would call for more collaboration in the future. He also underlined that the Taliban is not

the only threat to the Afghan people but that climate change is also becoming increasingly problematic. He thereby referenced the June 2022 earthquake as well as increased flooding and landslides. Bin Shah also expressed the fear of ‘brain drain’, as many Afghan professionals have or plan to immigrate elsewhere for employment and future prospects. In conclusion he stated that although Afghan people are in need of food and healthcare, the building of Afghanistan is first the responsibility of the Afghans and only after that of external bodies such as the EU.

Deren Derya agreed with the comments made by the first two panellists and stressed that after the Taliban takeover in August 2021 the EU stood by Afghanistan and made sure to find a way in which they could still engage, work and deliver for the Afghan people. One of the benchmarks in which the EU wants to engage with Afghanistan is inclusivity. She stressed the need to prioritise human rights - including women’s rights - with the biggest priority for the EU being the need to keep a space for Afghan people to live, function, and think freely. The EU has delivered more assistance since the Taliban takeover, mainly because they were warned by the UN and WFP that a million Afghans were at risk of famine after the ending of the ODA. She also stressed that no EU aid goes through the Taliban regime, as this would be unjustifiable to taxpayers. She underlined the need to work with the region, not just Afghanistan, including Turkey and Iran. Afghanistan is also a security risk to the EU, not just to its regional neighbours.

Lin Goethals then concluded the opening remarks and invited a discussion amongst the panellists about what can be done about the freefall economy. Bin Shah began the vibrant discussion by explaining how between 2014 and 2021 the Afghan economy was burdened by COVID-19, a drought and several other factors which caused a negative shift. He stressed the need for more confidence to be injected into the country’s private sector in order to create a long term vision that can achieve milestones which private businesses, including female-led companies, can benefit from. Derya responded by informing the audience that the reasoning behind money being hard to send into Afghanistan is mainly caused by the Taliban having placed several individuals currently listed by the UN as terrorists, as head of the banks. Strict international laws in place prevent countries to then correspond or send money to Afghanistan because of this. Derya stressed the lack of self-reflection from the Taliban government related to this decision, rather having chosen to blame the West for their frozen assets and sanctions.

Dr Zeino responded that there is a need to keep goals and expectations realistic and honest, as well as the understanding of how corruption in Afghanistan is often a survival technique.

Bin Shah stated that the key to Afghan success was the access to education and the provision that they will struggle to advance as a nation without it. Furthermore, he emphasised how the country's economic prosperity will not come from aid but rather through private business, further emphasising his previous remarks on the need for more confidence in the Afghan private sector. Derya reiterated that the biggest issue facing Afghans is inclusivity and despite how uncomfortable this may be, it is essential to keep civic spaces open. There are educated people in Afghanistan who have visions, also for a role for their country. It is crucial to hear these voices.

A lively Q&A session was then launched. Questions included accountability and who the panel believed to be responsible for the Taliban's take-over in the first place. Derya responded that there are also lessons to be learnt from western engagement and not to overlook the lessons identified and essential for a more coherent policy in Afghanistan.

The Q&A discussion gained further insight through a statement made by Nazifullah Salarzai, the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to Belgium, Luxembourg, the EU and NATO, intervening from the audience. He stated that Afghanistan questioned the region for not helping them in addressing their economic deficit, while Afghanistan is not setting a good example. Distrust of the West and reluctance to collaborate with the international community prevails after the treatment of Afghanistan and the Afghan people in 2021. He concluded that the Taliban are the only ones responsible and those to deal with, while 30 million people are held hostage to a regime that they do not necessarily want.